

Message Text

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PAGE 01 DAMASC 01941 071239Z
ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SSC-01 OMB-01 TRSE-00 EB-08 DOTE-00
AID-05 SSM-03 IO-13 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01 INR-10
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 ICA-11
/095 W

-----038187 071302Z /42

R 061344Z APR 78
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 0000
INFO CIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 1941

E.O. 11652: XGDS-2
TAGS: PINR, PINT, SY
SUBJ: SALIM YASSIN: MINISTER OF TRANSPORT

1. DR. SALIM YASSIN WAS NAMED BY PRESIDENTIAL DECREE MARCH 30 AS THE NEW MINISTER OF TRANSPORT. HIS ENTIRE CAREER HAS BEEN IN THE EDUCATIONAL FIELD SO IT MAY TAKE SOME TIME FOR HIM TO LEARN THE INTRICACIES OF HIS NEW POST. YASSIN SERVED AS THE PRESIDENT OF TISHRIIN UNIVERSITY IN LATAKIA FROM ITS FOUNDING IN 1971, WITH PRESIDENT ASSAD'S BLESSING AND RIF'AT AL-ASSAD'S CONSTANT ENCOURAGEMENT, UNTIL HIS APPOINTMENT AS MINISTER OF TRANSPORT. HE HAS ALSO BEEN SERVING DURING THAT PERIOD AS A MEMBER OF THE SUPREME COUNCIL OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SYRIA AND IS A MEMBER OF THE ARAB ECONOMIST ASSOCIATION.

2. YASSIN WAS BORN IN LATAKIA ON OCTOBER 10, 1937. IN 1956 HE CONTINUED HIS FORMAL EDUCATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF DAMASCUS GRADUATING WITH A BA IN COMMERCE IN 1960. IN THE SUMMER OF 1961 HE WENT TO THE US WITH FLUENT ENGLISH AS AN AID GRANTEE FOR TWO MONTHS AND THEN ENROLLED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO, BOULDER, WHERE HE RECEIVED HIS MA AND IN 1965 HIS PH.D IN ECONOMIC PLANNING. HE RETURNED TO LATAKIA WHERE
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HE MARRIED A HOMETOWN GIRL, NAJWA ISMAIL, WHO HAD BEEN BORN IN APRIL 1940. THE YASSINS HAVE HAD TWO BOYS, BORN IN 1968 AND 1976 AND THREE GIRLS, BORN IN 1964, 1972, AND 1974. THE FAMILY IS REPORTEDLY SUNNI BUT NOT ORTHODOX AND DOES NOT OBSERVE ANY DIETARY RESTRICTIONS.

3. ON HIS RETURN FROM BOULDER IN 1965 YASSIN WENT TO WORK

FOR THE MINISTRY OF PLANNING AND IN THE FOLLOWING YEAR TOOK UP A POST AS ASSISTANT PROFESSOR IN THE FACULTY OF ECONOMIC SCIENCES AT ALEPPO UNIVERSITY. FROM 1969 TO 1971 HE SERVED AS VICE PRESIDENT OF ALEPPO UNIVERSITY AS WELL AS PROFESSOR OF ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT AND STATISTICS.

4. YASSIN WAS SELECTED FOR AN AID PARTICIPANT TRAINING GRANT IN EDUCATIONAL PLANNING SPENDING THREE MONTHS IN THE US FROM SEPTEMBER 6, 1977 TO DECEMBER 7, 1977. HE LISTED HIS HOBBIES AT THAT TIME AS READING AND SWIMMING AND WAS CERTIFIED AS HAVING NO MEDICAL HISTORY OF ANY PROBLEMS OR OPERATIONS.

5. YASSIN'S APPOINTMENT CAME AS A SURPRISE TO SOME OF HIS FRIENDS SINCE THE TRANSPORT PORTFOLIO IS OUT OF HIS AREA AND IS CONSIDERED A THANKLESS TASK. JUDGING FROM HIS PAST PERFORMANCES AND THE REPORT HE PREPARED FOR AID, HE IS COMPETENT, HE HAS THE ADDED ADVANTAGE OF BEING A BAATH PARTY MEMBER ALTHOUGH THERE IS NO INDICATION HE HAS PLAYED A PARTICULARLY ACTIVE ROLE IN THE PARTY. HIS APPOINTMENT, WE ARE TOLD, WAS A REWARD FOR HIS DEVELOPMENT OF TISHRIIN UNIVERSITY. THE UNIVERSITY STRESSES AGRICULTURAL STUDIES AND IS LOOKED DOWN ON ACADEMICALLY BY THOSE WHO ATTEND DAMASCUS UNIVERSITY BUT WITH THE GOVERNMENT STRESSING AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT, TISHRIIN HAS A MORE FAVORABLE IMAGE IN THE EYES OF SYRIAN LEADERSHIP AND PARTICULARLY THE PRESIDENT.
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6. YASSIN IS AN UNUSUAL FIGURE IN SYRIA. THE BAATH PARTY HAS BEEN RELUCTANT TO EXPOSE SYRIANS TO WESTERN, CAPITALIST ORIENTED ECONOMIC STUDIES, YET YASSIN'S FORMAL TRAINING HAS BEEN LARGELY IN THE UNITED STATES. HE COULD BE DISMISSED AS A TECHNOCRAT BUT FOR HIS MEMBERSHIP IN THE BAATH PARTY AND HIS RANKING POSITION IN THE EDUCATIONAL STRUCTURE WHICH, MORE THAN ANY OTHER INTERNAL MINISTRIAL AREA EXCEPT LOCAL ADMINISTRATION, IS JEALOUSLY GUARDED AS A BAATH PRESERVE. WE ARE TEMPTED TO BELIEVE THAT YASSIN HAS FRIENDS IN HIGH PLACES BUT HAVE NO CONFIRMATION OF THIS THEORY. WE NOTE THAT RIFA'AT AL-ASSAD DID MUCH FOR TISHRIIN UNIVERSITY DURING HIS TENURE AS REGIONAL COMMAND MEMBER IN CHARGE OF HIGHER EDUCATION. YASSIN'S MOVING FROM THE SENSITIVE POSITION OF HEAD OF A UNIVERSITY TO A CABINET AS ONE OF ONLY FOUR NEW APPOINTMENTS SUGGESTS TO US THAT FOR WHATEVER REASON, YASSIN IS A COMER.
PELLETREAU

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: TRANSPORTATION, PERSONNEL APPOINTMENTS, MINISTERS (DIPLOMATS)
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 06 apr 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978DAMASC01941
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: X2
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780150-0734
Format: TEL
From: DAMASCUS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780487/aaaacvon.tel
Line Count: 112
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 92995cb5-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: n/a
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 07 mar 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3058402
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: SALIM YASSIN: MINISTER OF TRANSPORT
TAGS: PINR, PINT, SY, (YASSIN, SALIM)
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odb://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/92995cb5-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014